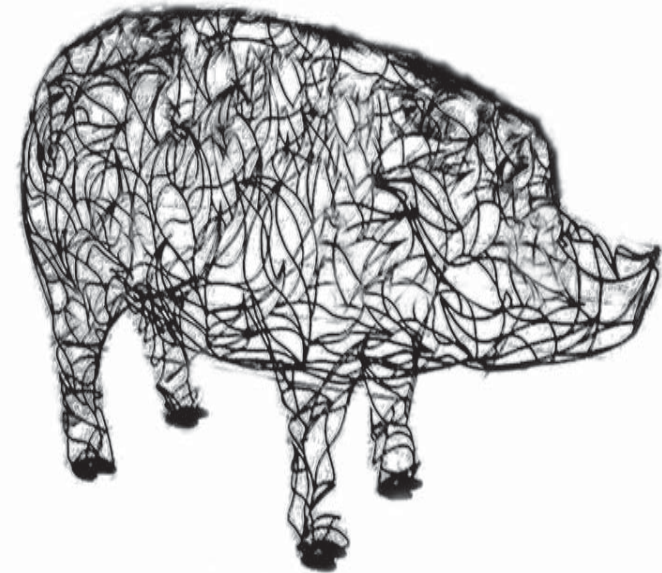
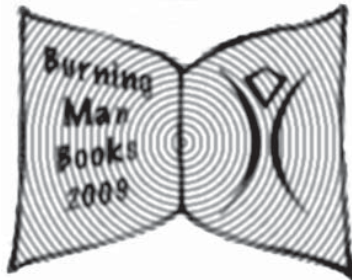


The Long,
Perfect Loveliness

of Sow:



Selected Poetry of Galway Kinnell

edited by Raymond Soulard, Jr. & Kassandra Soulard

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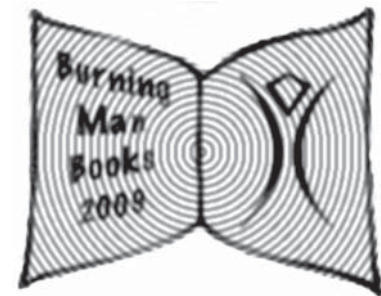
P O R T L A N D , O R E G O N



S C R I P T O R P R E S S

*The Long, Perfect
Loveliness of Sow:
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Galway Kinnell*

edited by Raymond Soulard, Jr.
& Cassandra Soulard



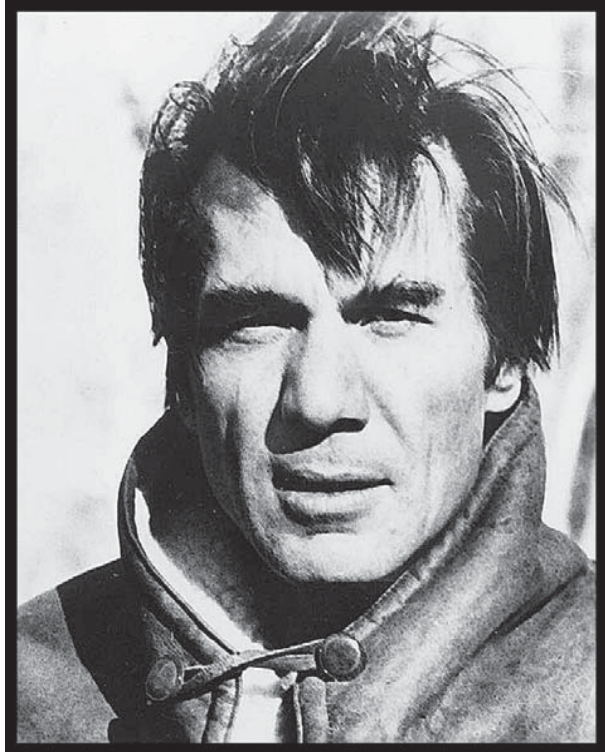
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**The Long, Perfect Loveliness of Sow:
Selected Poetry of Galway Kinnell**

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*For those young artists who worry the years
will grind them down, leave them barren of song,
consider how this singer's poems
have only grown stronger with the years . . .*



First Song

Then it was dusk in Illinois, the small boy
After an afternoon of carting dung
Hung on the rail fence, a sapped thing
Weary to crying. Dark was growing tall
And he began to hear the pond frogs all
Calling on his ear with what seemed their joy.

Soon their sound was pleasant for a boy
Listening in the smoky dusk and the nightfall
Of Illinois, and from the fields two small
Boys came bearing cornstalk violins
And they rubbed the cornstalk bows with resins
And the three sat there scraping of their joy.

It was now fine music the frogs and the boys
Did in the towering Illinois twilight make
And into dark in spite of a shoulder's ache
A boy's hunched body loved out of a stalk
The first song of his happiness, and the song woke
His heart to the darkness and into the sadness of joy.

Poem of Night

1

I move my hand over
Slopes, falls, lumps of sight,
Lashes barely able to be touched,
Lips that give way so easily
It's a shock to feel under them
The hard smile of bones.

Muffled a little, barely cloaked,
Zygoma, maxillary, turbinate.

2

I put my hand
On the side of your face,
You lean your head a little
Into my hand—and so,
I know you're a dormouse
Taken up in winter sleep,
A lonely, stunned weight.

3

A cheekbone,
A curved piece of brow,
A pale eyelid
Float in the dark,
And now I make out
An eye, dark,
Wormed with far-off, unaccountable lights.

4

Hardly touching, I hold
What I can only think of
As some deepest of memories in my arms,
Not mine, but as if the life in me
Were slowly remembering what it is.

You lie here now in your physicalness,
This beautiful degree of reality.

5

And now the day, raft that breaks up, comes on.

I think of a few bones
Floating on a river at night,
The starlight blowing in place on the water,
The river leaning like a wave toward the emptiness.

The Bear

1

In late winter
I sometimes glimpse bits of steam
coming up from
some fault in the old snow
and bend close and see it is lung-colored
and put down my nose
and know
the chilly, enduring odor of bear.

2

I take a wolf's rib and whittle
it sharp at both ends
and coil it up
and freeze it in blubber and place it out
on the fairway of the bears.

And when it has vanished
I move out on the bear tracks,
roaming in circles
until I come to the first, tentative, dark
splash on the earth.

And I set out
running, following the splashes
of blood wandering over the world.
At the cut, gashed resting places
I stop and rest,
at the crawl-marks
where he lay out on his belly
to overpass some stretch of bauchy ice
I lie out
dragging myself forward with bear-knives in my fists.

3

On the third day I begin to starve,
at nightfall I bend down as I knew I would
at a turd sopped in blood,
and hesitate, and pick it up,
and thrust it in my mouth, and gnash it down,
and rise
and go on running.

4

On the seventh day,
living by now on bear blood alone,
I can see his upturned carcass far out ahead, a scraggled,
steamy hulk,
the heavy fur riffling in the wind.

I come up to him
and stare at the narrow-spaced, petty eyes,
the dismayed
face laid back on the shoulder, the nostrils
flared, catching
perhaps the first taint of me as he
died.

I hack
a ravine in his thigh, and eat and drink,
and tear him down his whole length
and open him and climb in
and close him up after me, against the wind,
and sleep.

➤➤➤

And dream
 of lumbering flatfooted
 over the tundra,
 stabbed twice from within,
 splattering a trail behind me,
 splattering it out no matter which way I lurch,
 no matter which parabola of bear-transcendence,
 which dance of solitude I attempt,
 which gravity-clutched leap,
 which trudge, which groan.

Until one day I totter and fall—
 fall on this
 stomach that has tried so hard to keep up,
 to digest the blood as it leaked in,
 to break up
 and digest the bone itself: and now the breeze
 blows over me, blows off
 the hideous belches of ill-digested bear blood
 and rotted stomach
 and the ordinary, wretched odor of bear,

blows across
 my sore, lolled tongue a song
 or screech, until I think I must rise up
 and dance. And I lie still.

I awake I think. Marshlights
 reappear, geese
 come trailing again up the flyway.
 In her ravine under old snow the dam-bear
 lies, licking
 lumps of smeared fur
 and drizzly eyes into shapes
 with her tongue. And one
 hairy-soled trudge stuck out before me,
 the next groaned out,
 the next,
 the next,
 the rest of my days I spend
 wandering: wondering
 what, anyway,
 was that sticky infusion, that rank flavor of blood, that poetry,
 by which I lived?

Vapor Train Reflected in the Frog Pond

1

The old watch: their
thick eyes
puff and foreclose by the moon. The young, heads
trailed by the beginnings of necks,
shiver,
in the guarantee they shall be bodies.

In the frog pond
the vapor trail of a SAC bomber creeps,

I hear its drone, drifting, high up
in immaculate ozone.

2

And I hear,
coming over the hills, America singing,
her varied carols I hear:
crack of deputies' rifles practicing their aim on stray dogs at night,
sput of cattleprod,
TV groaning at the smells of the human body,
curses of the soldier as he poisons, burns, grinds, and stabs
the rice of the world,
with open mouth, crying strong, hysterical curses.

3

And by rice paddies in Asia
bones
wearing a few shadows
walk down a dirt road, smashed
bloodsuckers on their heel, knowing
the flesh a man throws down in the sunshine
dogs shall eat
and the flesh that is flung into the air
shall be seized by birds,
shoulder blades smooth, unmarked by old feather-holes,
hands rivered
by blue, erratic wanderings of the blood,
eyes crinkled almost shut,
seeing the drifting sun that gives us our lives.

One Who Used to Beat His Way

Down the street of warehouses,
each with
its redlighted shaftway,
its Corinthian columns,
its bum crapped out on the stoop,
he staggers, among
wraiths that steam up out of manhole covers
and crimesheets skidding from the past.

He gets a backed-up
mouthful of vomit-cut liquor, mumbles, "Thanks God,"
and regulps it. And
behind him the continent glimmers, the wild land
crossed by the *Flying Crow*
that changed her crew at Shreveport,
the *Redball* and the *Dixie Flyer*, that went on through,
the *Big 80*
that quilled her whistles to make blues on the Delta.
"Everybody's eating everybody, and nobody
gives a shit where they bite,"
the old timer growls, poking the jungle fire . . .
"Bible-ranters, bulls, hicks, systems, scissor-bills . . ."

And he who used
to beat his way hauls himself down
into his wino-niche, where he has left his small possessions,
a killed bottle,
a streambed of piss groping down dry stone.

Under the Maud Moon

1

On the path,
by this wet site
of old fires—
black ashes, black stones, where tramps
must have squatted down,
gnawing on stream water,
unhouseling themselves on cursed bread,
failing to get warm at a twigfire—

I stop,
gather wet wood,
cut dry shavings, and for her,
whose face
I held in my hands
a few hours, whom I gave back
only to keep holding the space where she was,

I light
a small fire in the rain.

The black
wood reddens, the deathwatches inside
begin running out of time, I can see
the dead, crossed limbs
longing again for the universe, I can hear
in the wet wood the snap
and re-snap of the same embrace being torn.

➤➤➤

The raindrops trying
to put the fire out
fall into it and are
changed: the oath broken,
the oath sworn between earth and water, flesh and spirit, broken,
to be sworn again,
over and over, in the clouds, and broken again,
over and over, on earth.

2

I sit a moment
by the fire, in the rain, speak
a few words into its warmth—
stone saint smooth stone—and sing
one of the songs I used to croak
for my daughter, in her nightmares.

Somewhere out ahead of me
a black bear sits alone
on his hillside, nodding from side
to side. He sniffs
the blossom-smells, the rained earth,
finally he gets up,
eats a few flowers, trudges away,
his fur glistening
in the rain.

The singed grease streams
out of the words, the one
held note
remains—a love-note
twisting under my tongue, like the coyote's bark,
curving off, into a
howl.

3

A round-
cheeked girlchild comes awake
in her crib. The green
swaddlings tear open,
a filament or vestment
tears, the blue
flower opens.

And she who is born,
she who sings and cries,
she who begins the passage, her hair
sprouting out,
her gums budding for her first spring on earth,
the mist still clinging about
her face, puts
her hand
into her mother's mouth, to take hold of
her song.

4

It is all over,
little one, the flipping
and overleaping, the watery
somersaulting alone in the oneness
under the hill, under
the old, lonely bellybutton
pushing forth again
in remembrance,
the drifting there furled in the dark,
pressing a knee or elbow
along a slippery wall, sculpting
the world with each thrash—the stream
of omphalos blood humming all about you.

➤➤➤

5

Her head
enters the headhold
that starts sucking her forth: existence
closes down all over her, draws her
into the shuddering
grip of departure, the slow,
agonized clenches making
the last molds of her life in the dark.

6

The black eye
opens, the pupil
droozed with black hairs
stops, the chakra
on top of the brain throbs a long moment in world light,

and she skids out on her face into light,
this peck
of stunned flesh
clotted with celestial cheesiness, glowing
with the astral violet
of the underlife. As they cut

her tie to the darkness
she dies
a moment, turns blue as a coal,
the limbs shaking
as the memories rush out of them. When

they hang her up
by the feet, she sucks
air, screams
her first song—and turns rose,
the slow,
beating, featherless arms
already clutching at the emptiness.

7

When it was cold
on our hillside, and you cried
in the crib rocking
through the darkness, on wood
knifed down to the curve of the smile, a sadness
stranger than ours, all of it
flowing from the other world,

I used to come to you
and sit by you
and sing to you. You did not know,
and yet you will remember,
in the silent zones
of the brain, a specter, descendant
of the ghostly forefathers, singing
to you in the nighttime—
not the songs
of light said to wave
through the bright hair of angels,
but a blacker
rasping flowering on that tongue.

For when the Maud moon
glimmered in those first nights,
and the Archer lay
sucking the icy biestings of the cosmos
in his crib of stars,



I had crept down
to riverbanks, their long rustle
of being and perishing, down to marshes
where the earth oozes up
in cold streaks, touching the world
with the underglimmer
of the beginning,
and there learned my only song.

And in the days
when you find yourself orphaned,
emptied
of all wind-singing, of light,
the pieces of cursed bread on your tongue,

may there come back to you
a voice,
spectral, calling you
sister!
from everything that dies.

And then
you shall open
this book, even if it is the book of nightmares.

The Dead Shall Be Raised Incorruptible

1

A piece of flesh gives off
smoke in the field—

carrion,
caput mortuum,
orts,
pelf,
fenks,
sordes,
gurry dumped from hospital trashcans.

Lieutenant!
This corpse will not stop burning!

2

“That you Captain? Sure,
sure I remember—I still hear you
lecturing at me on the intercom, *Keep your guns up, Burnsie!*
and then screaming, *Stop shooting for crissake, Burnsie!*
those are friendlies! But crissake, Captain,
I’d already started, burst
after burst, little black pajamas jumping
and falling . . . and remember that pilot
who’d bailed out over the North,
how I shredded him down to a bunch of guts on his strings?
one of his slant eyes, a piece
of his smile, sail past me
every night right after the sleeping pill . . .



“It was only
that I loved the *sound*
of them, I guess I just loved
the *feel* of them sparkin’ off my hands . . . ”

3

On the television screen:

Do you have a body that sweats?
Sweat that has odor?
False teeth coming away with your sandwich?
Case of the dread?
Headache so steady it may outlive you?
Armpits sprouting hair?
Piles so big you don’t need a chair to sit at a table?

We shall not all sleep, but we shall be changed . . .

4

In the Twentieth Century of my trespass on earth,
having exterminated the most I could of heathens,
heretics, Jews, Moslems, witches, mystical seekers,
Asians, blacks, including Christian brothers,
every one of them for his own good,

a continent of red men for living in community
and having spiritual relations with the land,
one billion species of animals for being sub-human,
and ready to take on the bloodthirsty creatures from the farthest stars,
I, Christian man, groan out this testament of my last will.

I give my blood fifty parts polystyrene,
twenty-five parts benzene, twenty-five parts good old gasoline,
to the last bomber pilot aloft, that there will be one acre
in the dull world where the kissing flower may bloom,
which kisses you so long your bones explode under its lips.

My tongue goes to the Secretary of the Dead
to tell the corpses, “I’m sorry, fellows,
the killing was just one of those things
difficult to pre-visualize—like a cow,
say, getting blown up by lightning.”

My stomach, which has digested
four hundred treaties giving the Indians
the right to their land, I give to the Indians,
I throw in my lungs full of tumors, from faithfully
smoking the peace pipe before every massacre.

My soul I leave to the bee
that he may sting it and die, my brain
to the fly, his back the hysterical color of slime,
that he may eat it and die, my flesh to the advertising man,
the anti-prostitute, who loathes human flesh for money.

I assign my crooked backbone
to the dice maker, to chop up into dice,
for casting lots as to who shall see his own blood
on his shirt front and who his brother’s,
for the race isn’t to the swift but to the crooked.

To the last one surviving on earth
I give my eyelids worn out by fear, to wear
in the long nights of radiation and silence,
so that the eyes can’t close, for regret
is like tears seeping through closed eyelids.

➤➤➤

I give the emptiness my hand: the pinkie picks no more,
slag clings to the black stick of the ring finger,
a bit of flame jets from the tip of the fuck-you finger,
the first finger accuses the heart, which has vanished,
on the thumb stump wisps of smoke ask a ride into the emptiness.

In the Twentieth Century of my nightmare
on earth, I swear on my chromium testicles
to this testament
and last will
of my iron will, my fear of love, my itch for money, and my madness.

5

In the ditch
snakes crawl cool paths
over the rotted thigh, the toe bones
twitch in the smell of burnt rubber,
the belly
opens like a deadly nightflower,
the tongue has evaporated,
the nostril
hairs sprinkle themselves with yellowish-white dust,
the five flames at the end
of each hand have gone out, a mosquito
sips a last meal from this plate of serenity.

And the fly,
the last nightmare, hatches himself.

6

*I ran
my neck broken I ran
holding my head up with both hands I ran
thinking the flames
the flames may burn the oboe
but listen buddy boy they can't touch the notes!*

7

A few bones
lie about in the smoke of bones.

Effigies pressed into grass,
mummy windings,
desquamations,
sags incinerated mattresses gave back to the world,
memories left in mirrors on bedroom ceilings,
angel's wings
flagged down into the snows of yesteryear,

kneel
on the scorched earth
in the shapes of men and animals:

*do not let this hour pass,
do not remove this last, poison cup from our lips.*

And a wind holding
the cries of love-making from all our nights and days
moves among the stones, hunting
for two twined skeletons to blow its last cry across,

*Lieutenant!
This corpse will not stop burning!*

Night Song

I cannot think who is guilty,
One or the other, both—I remember
Only the turning of platters *leaving me*
Blue blue Jezebel—so now I hear

Outside in the raining city
The poor shiver and go on walking and the unfed
Ask alms or shelter and get pity
And I know the lonely are afraid in their beds.

Daybreak

On the tidal mud, just before sunset,
dozens of starfishes
were creeping. It was
as though the mud were a sky
and enormous, imperfect stars
moved across it as slowly
as the actual stars cross heaven.
All at once they stopped,
and, as if they had simply
increased their receptivity
to gravity, they sank down
into the mud, faded down
into it and lay still, and by the time
pink of sunset broke across them
they were as invisible
as the true stars at daybreak.

St. Francis And The Sow

The bud
stands for all things,
even those things that don't flower,
for everything flowers, from within, of self-blessing;
though sometimes it is necessary
to reteach a thing its loveliness,
to put a hand on its brow
of the flower
and retell it in words and in touch
it is lovely
until it flowers again from within, of self-blessing;
as St. Francis
put his hand on the creased forehead
of the sow, and told her in words and in touch
blessings of earth on the sow, and the sow
began remembering all down her thick length,
from the earthen snout all the way
through the fodder and slops to the spiritual curl of the tail,
from the hard spininess spiked out from the spine
down through the great broken heart
to the blue milken dreaminess spurting and shuddering
from the fourteen teats into the fourteen mouths sucking
and blowing
beneath them:
the long, perfect loveliness of sow.

After Making Love We Hear Footsteps

For I can snore like a bullhorn
or play loud music
or sit up talking with any reasonably sober Irishman
and Fergus will only sink deeper
into his dreamless sleep, which goes by all in one flash,
but let there be that heavy breathing
or a stifled come-cry anywhere in the house
and he will wrench himself awake
and make for it on the run—as now, we lie together,
after making love, quiet, touching along the length of our bodies,
familiar touch of the long-married,
and he appears—in his baseball pajamas, it happens,
the neck opening so small he has to screw them on—
and flops down between us and hugs us and snuggles himself to sleep,
his face gleaming with satisfaction at being this very child.

In the half darkness we look at each other
and smile
and touch arms across this little, startlingly muscled body—
this one whom habit of memory propels to the ground of his making,
sleeper only the mortal sounds can sing awake,
this blessing love gives again into our arms.

The Frog Pond

In those first years I came down
often to the frog pond—once called,
before the earthen dam wore away,
the farm pond—to bathe, standing
on a rock and throwing pond water over me—
and doing it quickly because of the leeches,
who need but minutes to know you're there—
or to read the mail or to scribble
or to loaf and think, sometimes
of the future, while the one deerfly
that torments everyone who walks in Vermont
in July—smack it dead as often
as one will—orbited about my head.
Then the beavers came, the waters rose,
and the frog pond became the beaver pond.
The next year a sunken rowboat surfaced,
with sheet metal nailed all around it
to hold the hull boards in place
while they rotted. The four
of us would oar, pole, and bail
a few feet above the sunken green bank
where a man used to sit and think
and look up and seem to see four people
up here oaring and poling and bailing
above him: the man
seems happy,
the two children laugh and splash,
a slight shadow crosses the woman's face.
Then one spring the beavers disappeared—
trapped off, or else gone away
on their own—and soon this pond,
like the next, and the one after that,
will flow off, leaving behind its print
in the woods, a sudden green meadow
with gleams of sky meandering through it.

The man who lies propped up
on an elbow, scribbling in a notebook
or quietly thinking, will be older
and will remember the pond that was here,
writhing with leeches and overflown
by the straight blue bodies of dragonflies,
and will think of small children
grown up and true love broken
and will sit up abruptly and swat
the hard-biting deerfly on his head,
crushing it into his hair, as he has done before.

The Cat

The first thing that happened
was that somebody borrowed the Jeep,
drove fifty feet, went off the road.
The cat may have stuck a tire iron
or baseball bat into the steering wheel.
I don't know if it did or didn't.
I do know—I don't dare say it aloud—
when the cat is around something goes awry.
Why doesn't our host forewarn us? Well,
he tries. He gives each guest on arrival
a list of instructions about the cat.
I never was able to read mine,
for the cat was watching when I got it,
so I stuck it in my pocket to read later,
but the cat saw, leapt at me, nearly
knocked me down, clawed at the pocket,
would have ripped my clothes off
if I had not handed it over.
The guest book contains the name
of the young woman who was my friend,
who brought me here in the first place,
who is the reason I have come back,
to try to learn what became of her.
But no one would tell me.
Except tonight, my final evening,
at dinner, the host says, "There is
someone . . . someone . . . a woman . . .
in your life . . ." I know he means her,
but why the present tense? "Whom you have in . . ."
The next word sounds like "blurrarree"
but it could be "slavery." "Well, yes,"
I say. "Yes, but where is the cat?"
"It is an awful thing you are doing,"
he goes on. "Quite awful." "But who?"
I protest. "What are you talking about?"

"The cat," he says. "When you lock her up
she becomes dangerous." "The cat?
What cat?" I remember the one kitten saved
out of the burlap sack when I was seven,
I was mothering or fathering her, my father
or mother said, "Stop smothering it."
Now an electric force grabs my feet.
I see it has seized my host's, too—
he is standing up, his hands are flopping
in front of him. "What is it?" I whisper.
"I'm washing the dishes," he says.
"O my God," I think.
"I'm washing the dishes," he repeats.
I realize he is trying to get the cat to believe
he is not in a seizure but washing the dishes.
If either of us lets on about the seizure
it is certain the cat will kill us both.

The Man on the Hotel Room Bed

He shifts on the bed carefully, so as
not to press through the first layer
into the second, which is permanently sore.
For him sleep means lying as still as possible
for as long as possible thinking the worst.
Nor does it help to outlast the night—
in seconds after the light comes
the inner darkness falls over everything.
He wonders if the left hand of the woman
in the print hanging in the dark above the bed,
who sits half turned away, her right hand
clutching her face, lies empty,
or does it move in the hair of a man
who dies, or perhaps died long ago
and sometimes comes and puts his head in her lap,
and then goes back and lies under a sign
in a field filled nearly up to the roots
holding down the hardly ever trampled grass
with mortals, the once-lovers. He goes over
the mathematics of lying awake all night alone
in a strange room: still the equations require
multiplication, by fear, of what is,
to the power of desire. He feels around—
no pillow next to his, no depression
in the pillow, no head in the depression.
Love is the religion that bereaves the bereft.
No doubt his mother's arms still waver up
somewhere reaching for him; and perhaps
his father's are now ready to gather him
there where peace and death dangerously mingle.
But the arms of prayer, which pressed his chest
in childhood—long ago, he himself, in the name
of truth, let them go slack. He lies facedown,
like something washed up. Out the window
first light pinks the glass building across

the street. In the religion of love to pray
is to pass, by a shining word, into the inner chamber
of the other. It is to ask the father and mother
to return and be forgiven. But in this religion
not everyone can pray—least of all
a man lying alone to avoid being abandoned,
who wants to die to escape the meeting with death.
The final second strikes. On the glass wall
the daylight grows so bright the man sees
the next darkness already forming inside it.

The Man in the Chair

I glanced in as I walked past
the door of the room where he sat
in the easy chair with the soiled area
along the top from the olive oil.
I think I noticed something—
a rigidity in the torso, making it
unable to settle into the cushions,
or a slackness in the neck,
causing the head to tilt forward,
or a shaking in the lifted right fist,
as through he were pushing a hammer
handle back with all his force, to pull
a spike driven nineteen years before
the end of the nineteenth century
into *lignum vitae* so dense the steel
must have cried out in excruciated singsong,
or an acute angle in the knees,
as if he held his feet inches off
the floor to keep them from a whitish
wash of mist from some freshly
dug pit simmering across it,
or the jerk of a leg, as if a hand
just then had reached through the floor
and tried to grab it. I think I noticed,
yet I did not stop, or go in, or speak.
For his part he could not have spoken,
that day, or any day, had a human
version of the pip, the disease that thickens birds'
vocal cords and throttles their song.
I had it too, no doubt caught from him,
and I could not speak truly except
to the beings I had invented within.
I walked past, into my room, shut
the door, and sat down at the desk,
site of so many hours lost

passing one number through another
and drawing the little row of survivors on top,
while my mother sat across from me
catching my mistakes upside down.
I wrote, and as I did I allowed
to be audible in the room only
the scritch of the pen nib, a sound
like a rat crawling around in the dark
interior of a wall, making a nest of shreds.
All other sounds, including
the words he never said to me,
my cries to him I did not make, I forced down
through the paper, the desk, the floor,
the surface of the earth, the roof
of that dismal region where they stood,
two or three of them, who had reached up
and had him by the foot, and were pulling hard.

Parkinson's Disease

While spoon-feeding him with one hand
she holds his hand with her other hand,
or rather lets it rest on top of his,
which is permanently clenched shut.
When he turns his head away, she reaches
around and puts in the spoonful blind.
He will not accept the next morsel
until he has completely chewed this one.
His bright squint tells her he finds
the shrimp she has just put in delicious.
Next to the voice and touch of those we love,
food may be our last pleasure on earth—
a man on death row takes his T-bone
in small bites and swishes each sip
of the jug wine around in his mouth,
tomorrow will be too late for them to jolt
this supper out of him. She strokes
his head very slowly, as if to cheer up
each separate discomfited hair sticking up
from its root in his stricken brain.
Standing behind him, she presses
her cheek to his, kisses his jaw,
and his eyes seem to stop seeing
and do nothing but emit light.
Could heaven be a time, after we are dead,
of remembering the knowledge
flesh had from flesh? The flesh
of his face is hard, perhaps
from years spent facing down others
until they fell back, and harder
from years of being himself faced down
and falling back in his turn, and harder still
from all the while frowning
and beaming and worrying and shouting
and probably letting go in rages.

His face softens into a kind
of quizzical wince, as if one
of the other animals were working at
getting the knack of the human smile.
When picking up a cookie he uses
both thumbtips to grip it
and push it against an index finger
to secure it so that he can lift it.
She takes him then to the bathroom,
where she lowers his pants and removes
the wet diaper and holds the spout of the bottle
to his old penis until he pisses all he can,
then puts on the fresh diaper and pulls up his pants.
When they come out, she is facing him,
walking backwards in front of him
and holding his hands, pulling him
when he stops, reminding him to step
when he forgets and starts to pitch forward.
She is leading her old father into the future
as far as they can go, and she is walking
him back into her childhood, where she stood
in bare feet on the toes of his shoes
and they foxtrotted on this same rug.
I watch them closely: she could be teaching him
the last steps that one day she may teach me.
At this moment, he glints and shines,
as if it will be only a small dislocation
for him to pass from this paradise into the next.

My Mother's R & R

She lay late in bed. Maybe she was sick,
though she was never sick. There were
pink flowers in full blossom in the wallpaper
and motes like bits of something ground up
churning in sunrays from the windows.
We climbed into bed with her.
Perhaps she needed comforting,
and she was alone, and she let us take
a breast each out of the loose slip.
“Let’s make believe we’re babies,”
Derry said. We put the large pink
flowers at the end of those lax breasts
into our mouths and sucked with enthusiasm.
She laughed and seemed to enjoy our play.
Perhaps intoxicated by our pleasure,
or frustrated by the failure of the milk
to flow, we sucked harder, probably
our bodies writhed, our eyes flared,
certainly she could feel our teeth.
Abruptly she took back her breasts
and sent us from the bed, two small
hungry boys enflamed and driven off
by the she-wolf. But we had got our nip,
and in the empire we would found,
we would taste all the women and expel
each one as she came to resemble her.

Hitchhiker

After a moment, the driver, a salesman
for Travelers Insurance heading for
Topeka, said, “What was that?”
I, in my Navy uniform, still useful
for hitchhiking though the war was over,
said, “I think you hit somebody.”
I knew he had. The round face, opening
in surprise as the man bounced off the fender,
had given me a look as he swept past.
“Why didn’t you say something?” The salesman
stepped hard on the brakes. “I thought you saw,”
I said. I didn’t know why. It came to me
I could have sat next to this man all the way
to Topeka without saying a word about it.
He opened the car door and looked back.
I did the same. At the roadside,
in the glow of a streetlight, was a body.
A man was bending over it. For an instant
it was myself, in a time to come,
bending over the body of my father.
The man stood and shouted at us, “Forget it!
He gets hit all the time!” Oh.
A bum. We were happy to forget it.
The rest of the way, into dawn in Kansas,
when the salesman dropped me off, we did not speak,
except, as I got out, I said, “Thanks,”
and he said, “Don’t mention it.”

Telephoning In Mexican Sunlight

Talking with my beloved in New York
I stood at the outdoor public telephone
in Mexican sunlight, in my purple shirt.
Someone had called it a man/woman
shirt. The phrase irked me. But then
I remembered that Rainer Maria
Rilke, who until he was seven wore
dresses and had long yellow hair,
wrote that the girl he almost was
“made her bed in his ear” and “slept him the world.”
I thought, OK this shirt will clothe the other in me.
As we fell into long-distance love talk
a squeaky chittering started up all around,
and every few seconds came a sudden loud
buzzing. I half expected to find
the insulation on the telephone line
laid open under the pressure of our talk
leaking low-frequency noises.
But a few yards away a dozen hummingbirds,
gorgets going drab or blazing
according as the sun struck them,
stood on their tail rudders in a circle
around my head, transfixed
by the flower-likeness of the shirt.
And perhaps also by a flush rising into my face,
for a word — one with a thick sound,
as if a porous vowel had sat soaking up
saliva while waiting to get spoken,
possibly the name of some flower
that hummingbirds love, perhaps
“honeysuckle” or “hollyhock”
or “phlox” — just then shocked me
with its suddenness, and this time
apparently did burst the insulation,
letting the word sound in the open

where all could hear, for these tiny, irascible,
nectar-addicted puritans jumped back
all at once, fast, as if the air gasped.

Everyone Was in Love

One day, when they were little, Maud and Fergus
appeared in the doorway naked and mirthful,
with a dozen long garter snakes draped over
each of them like brand-new clothes.
Snake tails dangled down their backs,
and snake foreparts in various lengths
fell over their fronts. With heads raised and swaying,
alert as cobras, the snakes writhed their dry skins
upon each other, as snakes like doing
in lovemaking, with the added novelty
of caressing soft, smooth, moist human skin.
Maud and Fergus were deliciously pleased with themselves.
The snakes seemed to be tickled, too.
We were enchanted. Everyone was in love.
Then Maud drew down off Fergus's shoulder,
as off a tie rack, a peculiarly
lumpy snake and told me to look inside.
Inside the double-hinged jaw, a frog's green
webbed hind feet were being drawn,
like a diver's, very slowly as if into deepest waters.
Perhaps thinking I might be considering rescue,
Maud said, "Don't. Frog is already elsewhere."

Ode and Elegy

A thud. Shrieks. Frantic
wingbeats like a round
of soft applause.
The hawk jumps on top
of the jay knocked to the grass,
presses his wings to the ground,
digs his claws into the jay's
back, strikes the neck
over and over, scattering
blue feathers. Then,
as easily as a green wave
in heavy seas lifts a small boat
and throws it upside down,
still afloat but keel up, so
the hawk flips the jay,
then tears at his throat.

A blue wing wrests itself free, flaps
like a flag saying *i will fight you!*
The hawk stuffs the wing
back down into place and
clamps it there with one foot.
Now jay and hawk stare
at each other beak to beak,
as close as Jesus and Judas at their kiss.
The hawk strikes, the jay struggles
to strike back, but his neck breaks, his eyes
shrink into beads of taxidermists' glass.
The cere above the hawk's beak
flushes hard yellow from exertion.



As a grape harvester trampling out
the last juices of grape, so the hawk
treads the jay's body up and down
and down and up. He places
a foot on the throat and a foot
on the belly, flaps his wings,
repositions his feet, flaps again.

He pushes off, clutching transversely
the body of the jay, which is like a coffin
made in the shape and color of the dead.

Much as in *la décollage à l'américaine*
of the Lafayette Escadrille, when
the pilots would gain speed only yards
above the tarmac, then haul back
on the joystick, putting their planes
into nearly vertical ascent, just so
the sharp-skinned hawk, carrying
his blue load glinting in the sunlight
low to the ground, now suddenly
climbs steeply and soars over the tops
of the Norway spruce and the tamarack.

Burning the Brush Pile

I shoved into the bottom of the brush
pile two large grocery bags holding
chainsaw chaff well soaked
in old gasoline gone sticky—a kind
of homemade napalm, except, of course,
without victims, other than boughs,
stumps, broken boards, vines, crumbles.

Bracing my knees against the next-
to-the-top roundel of the twelve-foot
apple-picker stepladder,
I poured diesel all gurgling
and hiccupping into the center of the pile,
then climbed down and sloshed
the perimeter with kerosene and sludge.

Stepping back, I touched a match
to the oil rag knotted to the thick end
of a thick stick and hurled it, javelin
style, into the core of the pile,
which gasped, then illuminated:
red sunset seen through winter trees.
A small flame came curling out from either
side of the pile and quietly wavered there,
as if this were simply the way matter burns.
Suddenly the great loaded shinicle roared
into flames that leapt up sixty, seventy feet,
swarming through the hole they had heated
open in the chill air to be their chimney.



At noon I came back with a pitchfork
and flicked into the snapping flames
a lot of charred boughs, twig ends burnt off,
that lay around the edges of the fire
as if some elephantine porcupine had been
bludgeoned on its snout, on this spot,
and then, rotting away, had left a rough circle
of black quills pointing to where it had been.

In the evening, when the fire had faded,
I was raking black clarts out of the smoking dirt
and felt a tine of my rake snag on a large lump.
I jerked, shook, beat it apart, and out fell
a small blackened snake, the rear half
burnt away, the forepart alive. When
I took up this poor Isaac, it flashed its tongue,
then struck my hand a few times; I let it.

Already its tail was sealing itself off,
fusing shut the way we cauterize unraveling
nylon line by using its own hot oozings
as glue. I lowered it into the cool grass,
where it waggled but didn't get very far.
Gone the swift lateral undulation, the whip-tail,
the grip that snakes bring into the world.

It stopped where the grass grew thick
and flashed its tongue again, as if trying
to spit or to spirit away its pain,
as we do, with our growled profanities,
or as if uttering a curse, or—wild fantasy—
a benediction. Most likely it was trying to find
its whereabouts, and perhaps get one last take
on this unknown being also reeking of fire.
Then the snake zipped in its tongue
and hirpled away into the secrecy of the grass.

Pulling a Nail

In the year of my birth
my father buried this spike,
half in hemlock half in oak,
battered the flat of its head
into the dead center
of the round dent of his last blow.

He would have struck
in quick strokes filled
with inertia and follow-through.
He would have hit at the precise
moment the direction of force
in the hammer exactly lined up
with the axis of the nail.

As friction tightened, he would have
hit harder, striking up
shock waves that struck back
in his elbow and shoulder.

Near the end, when his arm
grew weak and his hand
could barely hang on,
he would have gone
all out and clobbered
the nail, crushed it into itself,
with each blow knocking
off kilter every new tilt of the head.



I hack and scrape
but can't get the hammer's claw
to catch under the rim of the nail,
and I have no nail pull or pry bar.
But looking back in time, I see
my father, how he solved
it when in the same fix:
angling the claw of his hammer
like a chisel, he cozied it
up to the nail head, then taking
a second hammer, smacked
the face of the first, and kept on
smacking it, until the claw
gouged grooves for itself
in the bruised wood and grudged under.
So I do as my father did.

Now begins what could be called
carpenters' arm wrestling, and also,
in this case, transrealmic combat
between father and son.
We clasp right hands (the flared
part of the hammer hand,
his hand) and press right elbows
to the hemlock (the curved
hammer head, his steel elbow) and pull.
Or rather, I pull, he holds fast, lacking
the writ to drag me down where he lies.

A nail driven so long ago
ought to be allowed to stay put,
until the structure it serves
crumbles into its ill-fitting cellar hold,
or on a freezing night flaps up
and disappears in a turmoil
of flame and smoke and its
blackened bones; or until the nail
discovers it has become
merely a nail hole filled with rust.

A spike driven long ago
resists being pulled—worse
than a stupefied wisdom tooth
whose roots, which have screwed
themselves into the jawbone,
refuse to budge; worse even
than an old pig who hears
the slaughterer's truck pull up
and rasp open its gate and rattle
its ramp into place, and grunts,
and squeals, and digs in.

Slipping for leverage
a scrap of quarter-inch wood
under the hammer, I apply
a methodology I learned from
unscrewing stuck bottle lids:
first, put it to the maximum force
you think you can maintain,
and second, maintain it.



Just as when an earthworm
pulls itself out of a cul-de-sac,
cautious end pulling adventurous end,
stretching itself almost in two
until the stuck end starts to come free,
so this nail, stretched and now
starting to let go, utters a thick squawk—
first sound it has made since
my father brought down his hammer
full force on it, adding a grunt of his own,
and thudded it home—and a half-inch
of newly polished steel stutters
out of fibrous matter intended to grip it
a good long time, if not forever.

My fulcrum this time a chunk
of inch board, I pull again, again
creating a chaotic ruckus,
and another segment of bright
steel screeches free.

Helped along this time by
a block of two-by-four lying
on its inch-and-three-quarter side,
I leverage out another noisy half-inch.
At last, standing the block up
on its three-and-three-quarter-inch side,
I pull hard, hold the pressure,
and the entire rest of the nail,
almost too hot to handle, extrudes
in an elegant curve of defeated matter.

It seems I've won.
But in matters like this
winning doesn't often
feel exactly like winning.
It's only a nail, I know,
an earthen bit. Bent.
Very possibly torqued.
And yet my father drove it
to stake out his only hope
of leaving something
lasting behind. See,
there he is now, bent
at his workbench,
in the permanent
gloom of the basement
of the house on Oswald
Street that he built, as he did
everything he did, alone,
probably driving all but a few dozen
of its ten thousand nails himself.



A dark yellowish aura, like
the dead glow of earliest
electricity, unused to being
harnessed, hangs above
his head. He's picking over
a small heap of bent nails,
chucking some, straightening
out others back into usefulness
in the rectilinear world.
At this one he pauses.
He lifts it to the light, sights
along it as if he doubts
it can ever be used again.
I take it from his hand just
as he fades out of sight.
In it I can feel the last heat
of our struggle. Thumb
and forefinger hold the nail
to the bench, bent side up,
forming a little wobbling
bridge between then
and now, between me and him,
or him and me, over which
almost nothing of what mattered
to either of us ever passed.
A hammer still floats in the space
he had been standing in.
I pluck it out of the air
and use it to hammer the nail
up and down its length, rotate it
to keep the bend on top,
hammer it, rotate it,
hammer it, well into the night.
The cellar windows become light.
It is late. I don't think
I will ever straighten it out.

Promissory Note

If I die before you
which is all but certain
then in the moment
before you will see me
become someone dead
in a transformation
as quick as a shooting star's
I will cross over into you
and ask you to carry
not only your own memories
but mine too until you
too lie down and erase us
both together into oblivion.